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ABSTRACT

The duty of conscientious writing teachers is to evaluate the kinds of feedback they are providing students, and to determine if it helps students to present ideas meaningful to them effectively in written discourse. Almost universally, the traditional way of providing feedback on student writing is by the red pencil method, which has made the teacher's role in a student's writing process basically one of an editor. To successfully motivate students to write, the teacher must provide an atmosphere which allows students to gain personal satisfaction from their writing. Less traditional theorists in the field of composition suggest that the teacher must transfer the power of evaluating writing to the student. Writing teachers must become listeners to the intents of student writers. The challenge writing teachers face is to provide suggestions which motivate the students to revise. Revision should be seen by the students as the repeated process of beginning again and thinking about fresh approaches and ideas which can enhance the intended message. The writer must always maintain strict authority over the content of his or her text, and all feedback should encourage student writers to self-evaluate, make their own decisions, and take control of their paper. (A 10-item annotated bibliography is attached.) (MG)

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The Teacher's Role In Responding to Student Writing

One question all teachers of writing must ponder deals with the effects our comments and feedback have on the student as a developing writer. Traditionally, our profession has practiced the philosophy that we must drill into the student the accepted standards of form and grammatical style. The ultimate goal of our feedback has been to provide students with a model of correct writing in hopes that their final products would conform to these standards. This kind of evaluation, however, disregards perhaps the most important quality of student writing, namely the ideas the students are attempting to communicate. Less traditional philosophies in the field of composition stress that the teacher must adopt a new role when evaluating student writing. Instead of immediately being a final judge over what the student has written, the teacher should first be a listener to what the student is attempting to say. The initial feedback from the teacher assuming the role of a listener will then focus on the students' intents in writing and if their writing actually achieved these intents. In light of these conflicting philosophies,

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the duty of conscientious writing teachers is to evaluate the kinds of feedback we are providing our students, and determine if this feedback is helping our students to present ideas meaningful to them effectively in written discourse.

Almost universally, the traditional way of providing feedback on student writing is by the "You make the mistake and I'll red pencil it method (Ney 279)." After reflecting upon our own formal writing training, this statement is probably difficult to refute. As students, we have all shared the common experience of scrupulously proofreading and editing a draft of a paper until it said exactly what we wanted it to say, only to have it returned several days later completely changed by the teacher. As exemplified by the extensive symbols and comments writing teachers have traditionally used to focus on errors in form and style, the teacher's role in a student's writing process has basically been one of an editor. The student makes the errors then corrects them according to the teacher's red marks on his or her paper (279). The student is expected to learn what constitutes good writing by focusing on these red marks which highlight only grammatical errors. Evaluative feedback in such a system simply becomes a matter of comparing a student's writing to a set of "correct"

rules personally concocted by the teacher (Beach 130). Gary Sloan traces the attitudes of teachers who evaluate writing in this way back to antiquity when he states that such teachers believe that "Somewhere in the realm of essences there exists a perfect way to express every conceivable thought. And of mortals, he alone has glimpsed those ideal forms of expression (34)."

Having just completed my first year of teaching high school English, the feedback I have provided to my students reflects this traditional approach of evaluating writing. I dutifully obeyed the curriculum given to me and taught the grammar lessons I was told would make my students better writers. I then assigned papers for the students to write and preached the importance of revising and editing so that the final product of their writing would be free from these grammatical errors I hopefully taught them to avoid. After collecting this final product, my job was then to evaluate the writing based on how well the student avoided these errors. When a student would deviate from the standards on which I so carefully lectured in class, I felt it was my duty to point out these errors so the student had an accurate picture of how his or her writing ought to have looked. I was evaluating student writing based on the premise that

the red marks I wrote on students' papers would provide them with an ideal model of writing they should adopt if they were to be successful on future writing endeavors. I took for granted that this evaluative philosophy was the most effective way because, after all, I was a first year teacher who was in no position to argue with the way writing was traditionally taught and evaluated, and I had such faith in the system I was using because of my own formal training that I did not feel the need to question it.

As the school year progressed, however, I noticed some qualities developing in the writing of my students that I did not particularly like. After I taught a series of lessons dealing with the placement of commas in a sentence, I noticed in a subsequent writing assignment that the students focused all of their attention on the placement of commas, even to the point of putting commas where the rules state they should not go. Even worse, I recognized that my students viewed conforming to the standards I had established as being more important than the ideas they wanted to communicate in their writing. This should have come as no surprise to me. After all, I had adopted a system of evaluation which placed more emphasis on form and style rather than content. One pitfall

of such a system is that most students prefer a good grade rather than personal satisfaction from writing, and will write only what the teacher wants to see. When this occurs, the potential writing has to bring about intellectual development and the chances it offers to express oneself freely are disregarded by the students, and writing becomes merely an exercise for a grade (Sloan 35). Consequently, my students were more reluctant to communicate ideas that they valued, and they lacked the incentive to write.

One job good writing teachers successfully do is motivating students to write. In order to successfully do this job, the teacher must provide an atmosphere which allows students to gain personal satisfaction from their writing. Personally, I can attest that my motivation to write comes from the satisfaction I feel when I know I have communicated what I wanted to say to the best of my ability. By evaluating my students' writing on form and style only, I was inhibiting their chance to feel this same satisfaction. I was showing my students that my self-constructed model of good writing was more important than their own, and what they wanted to say was less important than what I wanted to see (Knoblauch and Brannon 158). When this occurs, students

approach a writing assignment as being simply a ritualistic performance, produced for the purpose of being evaluated for errors in form and style and then discarded for another similar assignment (31).

After evaluating the feedback I gave to my students during the previous school year, it has become increasingly clear to me that my role as an editor in the writing process of my students did not produce the quality of writing for which I had hoped. I am sure that such feelings are quite common in the profession of teaching writing, and this is exactly why writing teachers must seriously contemplate assuming another role that is perhaps less comfortable, but more beneficial to the student as a developing writer. Less-traditional theorists in the field of composition such as C.H. Knoblauch, Lil Brannon, and Nancy Sommers suggest that the teacher must transfer the power of evaluating writing to the student. The rationale behind such a statement is that the responsibility for making judgements about the quality of their work must become the students' goal. If a teacher makes the decision that what students are attempting to say in their writing is at least as important as the form and style in which they present it, it becomes important that the students be able to

feel the rightness and wrongness of their statements because they are ultimately responsible for what they write (Probst 76). According to Dean and Gordon Thomas, writing teachers must become listeners to the intents of student writers (115). As listeners of student writing, instructors must recognize that it is the author's right to make statements in exactly the way they are made so they say exactly what the writer wishes to say (Knoblauch and Brannon 157). Donald Murray concedes that listening to what the student is trying to communicate has not normally been a skill of writing teachers, but a skill which has to be adopted if the student is to have the primary voice in his writing, and consequently be more motivated to write (143).

One concern involved in experimenting with this philosophy involves what we as writing teachers must do when the time comes to provide students with feedback on their writing. Robert Probst states that teachers who want to assume the role as a listener must read each student's paper with the same purpose they bring to other texts, the purpose of making meaning (71). The teacher then becomes a person from whom the student can seek meaningful and applicable advice. The instructor willing to work within the framework of the student's own

style tends to inspire confidence in the student and is perceived as a helpful person rather than a ruthless dictator (Sloan 36). Teachers' jobs are not to compare students' writing to their own ideal texts, but to focus on the disparity between what the writers wanted to communicate and if they did indeed communicate these ideas to their readers (Knoblauch and Brannon 161). The most-meaningful feedback to the students would focus on these areas. By simply recognizing the student's attempt to communicate, we give it legitimacy and increase the chances of evoking further meaningful responses from the student (Thomas and Thomas 123).

The teacher's job is to provide such feedback prior to the student turning in the final draft of a paper. In my classroom, feedback from the teacher would not come until after the students turned in these final drafts. When I did allow the students to revise, their revisions would simply consist of them correcting the errors in usage and style on which I had so carefully focused. According to advocates of this alternate approach to evaluating writing, these more meaningful responses during the stage of revising occur after feedback from the teacher points out any ambiguities possibly encountered in the students' text. Students are then able to look back at what they had written and rethink and rewrite the

ideas they did not quite successfully convey. In such cases, the students are still completely in charge of the ideas they want to communicate. What they decide needs clarified or polished is up to them. Appropriate feedback and meaningful comments from the teacher can develop this kind of positive atmosphere.

The challenge we face as teachers of writing is to provide suggestions which motivate the students to revise. This kind of feedback should not be an attempt on the part of the teacher to tell the students what to do, but rather observations from a reader's point of view which provide students with different options they can employ to better say what they are trying to communicate. Revision should be seen by students as a discovery or the repeated process of beginning again and thinking about fresh approaches and ideas which can enhance the intended message (Sommers 156). Teachers need to show students through well-timed and strategic feedback why new choices would positively change their texts and allow the students to personally address these choices (156). Thus, extensive opportunities to rewrite a text becomes a powerful tool that shows students first-hand the improvements they are capable of making as writers. Consequently, students will be more motivated to revise

because they will have maintained personal control over the ideas they felt were important enough to share with their readers.

If the purpose of feedback from the teacher is to motivate the students to undertake such an extensive but beneficial approach to revising their texts, it becomes imperative that they be provided some kind of forum in which they can personally receive a reader's analysis of their writing. Student writers need and want thoughtful commentary that shows them if they have or have not communicated their ideas, raising questions from a reader's point of view that may not have occurred to them as writers (148). Because communication between the writer and reader is vital, ample classroom time must be allotted for such dialogue. The challenge facing the teacher is to find efficient ways to provide such

- feedback within the framework of the class. Two options which are by no means original but very beneficial to a student writer are the opportunity to meet individually with the instructor or to receive feedback from peer groups. In both cases, the teacher or student evaluators must resist the temptation to attack weaknesses in the text and to tell the student what to do. Instead, any evaluation should be a negotiative process between the writer and reader(s) which centers on

ways the writer may choose to bring the actual effect of his writing as closely as possible to his intention (Knoblauch and Brannon 162). Whether utilizing the individual conference or peer group approaches, the writer must always maintain strict authority over the content of his or her text, and all feedback should encourage student writers to self-evaluate, make their own decisions, and take control of their paper (Newkirk 317).

The adverse effects I perceived in my students' writing caused by my feedback based on form and style only has made me reach the difficult conclusion that I must assume a role more beneficial to my students than one of an editor. Armed with the knowledge that there are alternate ways of evaluating student writing which have worked for others makes me feel optimistic about returning to the classroom next September. I want to establish an environment where students do not view writing as an exercise which requires them to conform to the artificial standards of form and style, but first and foremost a process which enables them to communicate something which is personally meaningful in the best way they can. Undertaking such an extensive transformation will most likely

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be a slow and uncomfortable process, but one I feel the need to undergo if I am to assume a role most beneficial to my students as developing writers.

Works Cited

Beach, Richard. "Showing Students How to Assess: Demonstrating Techniques for Response in the Writing Conference." Writing and Response: Theory, Practice, and Research. Ed. Chris M. Anson. Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1989. 127-48.

Beach devises strategies aimed at helping students assess their own writing. Beach also discusses in detail the different stages of a writing conference, and personal observations of which strategies work and which do not.

Knoblauch, C.H. and Lil Brannon. "On Students' Rights to their Own Texts: A Model of Teacher Response." College Composition and Communication 33(May 1982): 157-66.

Knoblauch and Brannon stress that writing teachers must grant writers authority over their texts. They discuss instances when this does not occur and attempt to prove that such teachers undervalue the student's attempt to communicate.

---. Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing. Upper Montclair, New Jersey: Boynton/Cook Heinemann, 1984.

Knoblauch and Brannon discuss the importance of teaching with a philosophy as well as the roles of ancient and modern rhetoric in determining this philosophy. The authors also focus on the writing process of the student and present effective ways in which the teacher can provide meaningful feedback.

Murray, Donald M. "The Writer's First Reader." College Composition and Communication 33(May 1982): 140-47.

Murray discusses how writing is a highly introspectional activity, and he argues that the teacher must become a listener of student writing if he is to provide feedback which is meaningful to the student. He then discusses the benefits of individual conferences with the student and his belief that the student writer should do the majority of the talking.

Newkirk, Thomas. "The First Five Minutes: Setting the Agenda in a Writing Conference." Writing and Response: Theory, Practice, and Research. Ed. Chris M. Anson. Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1989. 317-31.

Newkirk discusses the role of the teacher in the writing conference. Actual dialogue from a conference is also included in the text, and Newkirk suggests some strategies that the teacher might employ in such conferences.

Ney, James W. "On Not Practicing Errors." Teaching High School Composition. Eds. Gary Tate and Edward P.J. Corbett. New York: Oxford University Press, 1970. 279-88.

Ney discusses limitations in the traditional way of evaluating student writing by focusing on feedback which is used only to tell the student writer what not to do.

Probst, Robert E. "Transactional Theory and Response to Student Writing." Writing and Response: Theory, Practice, and Research. Ed. Chris M. Anson. Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1989. 68-79.

Probst defines the teacher's role in evaluating writing as one of a reader of what the student is trying to communicate, not an editor or diagnostician. He also discusses strategies teachers can use to prompt students to evaluate their own writing.

Sloan, Gary. "The Perils of Paper Grading." English Journal 33(May 1982): 148-56.

Sloan discusses the traditional English teacher as being a revisionist when it comes time to evaluate student writing. He also states that because students prefer a good grade rather than personal satisfaction from writing, they will write only what the teacher wants to see.

Sommers, Nancy. "Responding to Student Writing." College Composition and Communication 33(May 1982): 148-56.

Sommers discusses the effects certain comments from the teacher have on student writers. Sommers also argues that feedback based only on grammatical errors can take students' attentions away from their own purposes in writing and focus that attention on teachers' purposes in commenting.

Thomas, Dean and Gordon Thomas. "The Use of Rogerian Reflection in Small-Group Writing." Writing and Response: Theory, Practice, and Research. Ed. Chris M. Anson. Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1989. 114-26.

Dean and Gordon Thomas discuss briefly the teacher's role as a listener to student writing. In more detail, the authors describe the benefits of small group writing conferences and devise strategies teachers can use so peer feedback is always meaningful to the student author.